Other Neolithic Game Boards

Kirkbride's excavations at Beidha yielded the first known Neolithic specimens of game boards (Kirkbride 1966: 34). They differ somewhat in detail from the ʿAin Ghazal piece. Two broken and one complete game board were found in Level II, and a fourth was only partially exposed in Level VI. All four pieces have two parallel rows of depressions. The complete specimen from Level II has only four "cups" in each row, and the depressions in each are connected by a shallow groove that extends along the entire length of the long axis (Kirkbride 1966: fig. 8–1). The Level VI game board has the beginning of two parallel rows of depressions next to a single cup at the exposed end.

Dating the Beidha game boards is problematic.[4] Seventeen radiocarbon dates have been published for the site, but they vary considerably within and between the archaeological levels (Weinstein 1984: 328–29). The oldest date from Level VI, for example, is 6990 ± 160 b.c. (uncalibrated), although assays on another sample produced three dates ranging from 6596 ± 100 to 6760 ± 130 b.c. One sample from Level IV yielded four dates spanning an interval from 7178 ± 103 to 6690 ± 160 b.c. Level II produced only a single radiocarbon sample from which three dates were determined that range from 7080 ± 50 to 6600 ± 160 b.c. Based on the averages of the dates for each level, Levels II and IV appear to be older than Level VI (which is the lowermost stratum), although the ranges for all of the strata overlap.

Another Neolithic game board has been reported from a layer dated to between 6300 and 5900 b.c. at Chagha Sefid in the Deh Luran region of western Iran. It is a broken gypsum slab, about one-half the size of the two complete Jordanian examples, with up to 13 holes ca. 1 cm deep and 1 cm in diameter. Although Hole states that it resembles the Beidha game board, there appear to be at least three rows of depressions (Hole 1977: 215; pl. 48–h). This suggests that if it is a game board, different rules pertained, perhaps resembling one of the more complex *wari* variants described by Zaslavsky (1973: 122–27).

Bronze Age Game Boards

It may be significant that no game boards from the late sixth through the early third millennium B.C. in the Levant have been reported. On the other hand, games similar to *mancala* may have been played throughout this period on perishable boards, or using no boards at all (see above). It was not until the Early Bronze Age that definite evidence of game playing reemerged in the eastern Mediterranean zone.

Swiny has masterfully synthesized most of the known archaeological information from the Bronze Age, and it will not be repeated here (Swiny 1980). Instead, it is sufficient to note that Lee's, MacDonald's, and Amiran's information conforms very closely to Swiny's account of game-playing in the ancient world. It should be also noted that all of the game boards from Palestine, Jordan, and Cyprus are well dated to the earlier part of the Bronze Age, as early as 2770 B.C. (calibrated)[5] if not earlier.

The Bronze Age games cited by Swiny (as well as those described from Ur) are relatively complex compared to the Neolithic ʿAin Ghazal example. Swiny noted two major variants: 1) a rectangular arrangement of parallel compartments in a three-by-ten array that consists of pecked depressions and/or incised squares; or 2) an unspecified number of pecked depressions in a generalized spiral. While Swiny based his analysis principally on Cypriot specimens, it is interesting that the earlier Bronze Age Palestinian and Jordanian examples conform to his general description. Furthermore, the presence of depressions/incisions on both faces of the Cypriot game boards led Swiny to conclude that they are not religious or ritualistic in nature.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The simple two-by-six array of depressions in the ʿAin Ghazal game board contrasts considerably with the complex arrangements of the Early Bronze Age games from Mesopotamia, Cyprus, Palestine, and Jordan. Superficially, this could be taken to indicate that Neolithic people had not attained a level of cleverness in game-playing that was common in later periods. But such a conclusion clearly ascribes underachievement to Neolithic society on a false measure of human intelligence and inventiveness. By comparison, "Chinese checkers" uses a much more elaborate board than "western checkers," although chess (played on the simpler format) is a far more subtle and complex game than Chinese checkers. Furthermore, the appearance of game boards in the Neolithic period should not be taken to represent the earliest evidence of human game playing. The old archaeological adage that "the absence of evidence